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# OPERATIONALIZING THE GRAY ZONE: A CHALLENGE FOR CANADA

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**JCSP 45**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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## CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

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## **OPERATIONALIZING THE GRAY ZONE: A CHALLENGE FOR CANADA**

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the United States (US) became the world's sole super power. Many hoped this unipolar world would be the gateway to a new era of cooperation between the world's great powers, where a focus on global economic wellbeing would trump conflict between nations. However, states dissatisfied with their place in the world still sought strategies to change their global lot. Countries like Russia and China needed a different way to apply the power at their disposal to affect global change in their favour without resorting to physical conflict. They soon realized that liberal democracies had a 'redline' which when crossed would likely lead to full scale war. If this redline could be identified, all activities below it could be fair game for action without a significant western response. This zone between peace and war has become known as the Gray Zone of Conflict (GZC), and operations within it have become a prevalent issue for liberal democracies to face.

This modern conundrum has flummoxed western leadership who have focussed on the development of technologically advanced military weaponry to win conventional wars. This approach is not conducive to dealing with conflict below full scale war, resulting in both political and military leaders to seek strategies in order to counter these burgeoning threats. This was clearly evident in the Commander of Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), Lieutenant-General Mike Rouleau's memorandum "How We Fight: Commander CJOC's Thoughts", where he reflected that the "vast preponderance of future conflict will occur outside the state on state, heavy metal confrontation space," and that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) "is operating today, every day, in the Grey Zone...where tactical actions accrue almost real-time strategic significance."<sup>1</sup> But despite its importance there is confusion as to what the GZC is. The only institutional definition available to the CAF is found in Canada's current defence policy "Strong,

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Rouleau, *How We Fight: Commander CJOC's Thoughts*, Ottawa, Ontario, 10 February 2019.

Secure, Engaged” (SSE), which simplistically describes the gray zone as “...methods that exist [sic] just below the threshold of armed conflict.”<sup>2</sup> With this simple definition, how can Canada hope to operationalize this concept?

This paper will argue that Canada is currently incapable of operationalizing the GZC. As it is still a nebulous and misunderstood concept, the first section of this paper will seek to define what the gray zone actually is. Subsequently, this paper will examine how the gray zone has been successfully operationalized by global adversaries, and how western liberal democracies can successfully operate within this complex space. Based on these premises, this paper will prove that Canada is currently unable to conduct operations within the gray zone due to a limited capacity to fight disinformation, a limited capability to plan in response to gray zone threats, and its inability to apply a whole of government approach to meet national challenges. Finally, this paper will conclude with suggestions that could be used by the government of Canada to improve its response to gray zone adversaries.

## **WHAT IS THE GRAY ZONE?**

There are those that would argue that the GZC does not exist at all. Dr. Michael Mazarr, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation and former Associate Dean of the US National War College agrees in part with this position. Mazarr contends that “Concepts such as political destabilization, support for proxies and militias, information campaigns, and much more have been a staple of statecraft since the city states of ancient Greece were vying for influence.”<sup>3</sup> However, Mazarr believes there are three reasons that make the recognition of the gray zone important. First, major powers such as Russia, China, and Iran are actively using gray zone

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<sup>2</sup> National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy* (Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States War College Press, 2015), 3.

strategies in the world today to further their regional and global agendas. Second, the physical and economic cost of all-out warfare is too severe for aggressive nations to pursue, therefore forcing them to use gray zone activities with increasing frequency. Third, new tools such as “cyber weapons, advanced forms of information campaigns, and elaborate civilian tools of statecraft...lend growing intensity to these campaigns.”<sup>4</sup>

Even the adversaries of the west agree that this area of conflict is increasing. In his often quoted “Value of Science and Prediction”, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces stated:

The very “rules of war” have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures...<sup>5</sup>

Upon analyzing the military exploits of western powers over the past thirty years, China has come to much the same conclusion. In their article entitled “Unrestricted Warfare,” written by People’s Liberation Army colonels Wang Xiangsu and Qiao Liang, future warfare was described as using “all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” Wang and Qiao argued, “All boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally removed.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, if the gray zone is important to both academics and military professionals alike, it is important to identify what the gray zone actually is. As there is no clear agreement it is important to analyze examples of gray zone operations by our adversaries to develop a clearer

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science is in the Foresight,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsu, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 7-12.

definition of a space that is ambiguous by its very nature. This paper will use the activities of Russia in Ukraine and China in the South China Sea to better define the GZC.

### **Russia in the Gray Zone**

In February 2014 soldiers of unidentified origin took control of the Crimean Peninsula in Eastern Ukraine. These ‘little green men’ wore Russian military uniforms with no identifying insignia, seizing key installations and transportation corridors, enabling Russian control in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin denied Russian involvement, describing these men as local self-defence forces, a narrative which was unanimously supported by Russian news agencies. The same occurred in the Donbas region two months later, where men who looked exactly like Russian soldiers assisted ethnic Russians living in Ukraine to seize control. Within months, the Donbas and Crimean regions had held referendums resulting in the decision to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. Russian actions in Ukraine effectively countered Ukrainian attempts to join the EU and NATO, and increased Russian spheres of influence while resulting in no decisive military reaction from any NATO nation.<sup>7</sup>

### **China in the Gray Zone**

In 1992, China passed domestic law claiming jurisdiction over disputed islands in the East and South China Seas. Domestic laws and historical claims were then used from 2000 to 2009 as justification to protect these waters through the use of the Chinese coast guard, denying the use of what had been international waters to all but the United States and Japan. Finally, the Chinese began to build tactical infrastructure on reefs found in international waters, resulting in increased Chinese influence with its neighbours despite being declared in violation of international law. China’s gradual normalization of its jurisdiction over the Spratley Islands has

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<sup>7</sup> Brookings, “Testimony: The Growing Russian Military Threat in Europe,” Last modified 17 May 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-growing-russian-military-threat-in-europe/>

increased its sphere of influence, without resulting in a physical military response from western nations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Defining the Gray Zone**

Based on the previous examples, common themes can be identified which allow for an understanding of what the GZC is. The first is ambiguity. Russia's denial of military involvement within Ukraine and the fact that its soldiers were not wearing any obvious insignia created doubt in the eyes of the world as to who was behind activities in Crimea and Donbas. In the South China Sea, China's construction of man-made islands created international uncertainty as to how best to respond to something that is not clearly military in nature. In Ukraine, Russia leveraged diplomatic and informational instruments of national power to provide an excuse for its use of the military, while China avoided the overt use of the military, relying instead on diplomatic, informational and economic power to give the world pause. In both cases the ambiguity and refusal to clearly engage militarily creates hesitation by western liberal democracies in triggering a military response.

With these themes tempered by the concepts presented by Mazarr, Gerasimov, Wang, and Qiao, a clearer definition of the gray zone can be understood: an adversary's leveraging of ambiguity and multiple instruments of national power to gain advantage within the security domain while remaining below the threshold of open warfare.<sup>9</sup> This definition helps not only to define what actions within the gray zone are, but also provides direction as to those which are not. Gray zone activities are not simply diplomatic pressure, economic competition, or military

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<sup>8</sup> The National Interest, "Five Shades of Chinese Gray-Zone Strategy," Last modified 2 May 2017. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/five-shades-chinese-gray-zone-strategy-20450>

<sup>9</sup> Belinda Bragg, *Integration Report: Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities*, (Arlington, VA: National Security Innovations), 4.

actions below the level of unrestricted war. They are security focused activities that limit the engagement of military actors in a realm which in the past necessitated military response.

## **OPERATIONALIZING THE GRAY ZONE**

To understand how Canada might operationalize the GZC it is helpful to establish the basis for the conduct of operations by adversary nations within this complex place between peace and war. This section will focus on three areas to explain the operationalization of the GZC: adversary strategies, adversarial tools, and recommended response options for liberal democracies.

In his 2015 report for the US War College entitled “Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict,” Dr. Michael Mazarr offered three key strategies typically leveraged by adversaries within the GZC: revisionist, gradualist, and the use of unconventional tools. It is his position, that these strategies “are creating a new approach to the pursuit of aggressive aims...ongoing campaigns by China and Russia, suggest [sic] that gradual gray zone strategies may be becoming the tool of choice for states wanting to reframe the global order in the 21st century.”<sup>10</sup>

The first of Mazarr’s strategies focuses on the need for adversaries to pursue revisionist goals in order to transform their place within the existing world. He argues that although major powers have common interests and benefit from international order, they are not necessarily satisfied with their place within it. He describes these states as measured revisionists: working to change the status-quo to their favour while using “an ambiguous and complex middle ground...to shift international rules, norms, distribution of goods, and patterns of authority to their benefit.”<sup>11</sup> He contends that revisionist states are not inherently aggressive or adventurist,

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<sup>10</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone...*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



but are utilizing a natural strategy for ambitious powers to pursue a change to their place within the existing system, without remaking it entirely.

The second of Mazarr's strategies is the use of gradualist approaches to change a nation's position within the international system. This strategy seeks to avoid short, decisive actions typically found within the conduct of military operations in order to create confusion as to their motives and blur the red lines typically established by western liberal democracies.<sup>12</sup> This approach, which is analogous to 'Salami Slicing' described by the author Thomas Schelling, is best explained using the metaphor found within his book "Arms and Influence" describing a parent attempting to keep their child from entering the water:

...and he'll sit on the bank and submerge his feet; he is not yet "in" the water. Acquiesce, and he'll stand up; no more of him is in the water than before. Think it over, and he'll start wading, not going any deeper; take a moment to decide whether this is different, and he'll go a little deeper, arguing that since he goes back and forth it all averages out. Pretty soon, we are calling him not to swim out of sight, wondering whatever happened to all our discipline.<sup>13</sup>

This gray zone strategy takes advantage of the often unclear nature of the interconnected and chaotic world in which nations exist. By staying below norms established by other states whose violation might result in military action, gray zone actors can slowly create change through the forced evolution of new norms "none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*, but which add up over time to a substantial change in the strategic picture."<sup>14</sup>

The final strategy described by Mazarr is the use of unconventional tools which he defines as hybrid warfare, unconventional warfare, and political warfare. Closest to conventional warfare, hybrid warfare synchronizes conventional military operations, psychological operations, and information warfare to undermine the resolve of the public in states waging war to destroy

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone...*, 38.

the morale of adversaries.<sup>15</sup> Unconventional warfare, or state sponsored insurgency, is also leveraged throughout the gray zone through the deniable employment of proxies to destabilize or overthrow governments.<sup>16</sup> The use of political warfare within the gray zone leverages integrated strategies of information operations, development aid, regime support, and other nonviolent options to encourage specific political outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

Through the use of these strategies, gray zone actors leverage specific tools to be able to conduct operations within the GZC. These tools are well represented in the article “What Works, Countering Gray Zone Coercion” by John Schaus et al, where the authors identify six tools being used throughout the world to further gray zone strategy: military, paramilitary, or other state controlled forces; proxy forces; information warfare; corruption of politicians; economic tools; and shaping civil society.<sup>18</sup>

*Military, paramilitary, or other state-controlled forces.* The use of armed forces who act directly on the orders of the state in question are considered state-controlled forces. For example, both China and Russia have leveraged the use of their navies to deny freedom of movement within the South China Sea and the Black Sea respectively.<sup>19</sup>

*Proxy forces.* The exertion of political influence through forces acting on the behalf of a government, but not necessarily under their direct control are considered proxy forces.

Fisherman using intimidation tactics in the South China Sea on behalf of the Chinese

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<sup>15</sup> András Rác, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist*, (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs), 42-43.

<sup>16</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone...*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> John Schaus et al, “What Works: Countering Gray Zone Coercion,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (July 2018), 2.

<sup>19</sup> South China Morning Post, “Chinese navy sent to confront USS Chancellorsville in latest South China Sea stand-off,” Last modified 1 December 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2175916/chinese-navy-sent-confront-uss-chancellorsville-latest-south>; The Economist, “Explaining the naval clash between Russia and Ukraine,” Last modified 1 December 2018. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/12/01/explaining-the-naval-clash-between-russia-and-ukraine>

government, or the pro-Russian separatists acting on behalf of Russia in Crimea would be considered the use of proxy forces.<sup>20</sup>

*Information Warfare.* Information warfare techniques are used to contribute to the distraction and confusion of states that might try and stop the activities of gray zone actors. The use of social media, news agencies, and other outlets to support state propaganda efforts have been used by Russia in their attempts to influence sovereign elections, and China in the development of their narrative describing their Belt and Road Initiative as a magnanimous project seeking global peace.<sup>21</sup>

*Corruption of Politicians.* States leverage this tool to directly influence political candidates or leaders through the provision of gifts, money, or blackmail in order to gain an advantage. China has been found to be actively funding political campaigns to further their influence within the South China Sea through New Zealand, and Russia has done the same to secure political support for a pro-Russian government in Ukraine. Iran has also sought to influence Hamas through provision of economic support to influence its attempts at regional hegemony in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Guardian, “Little blue men: the maritime militias pushing China's claims,” Last modified 16 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/16/little-blue-men-the-maritime-militias-pushing-chinas-claims-in-south-china-sea>; Reuters, “Separatist-held regions hold elections in eastern Ukraine,” 11 November 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-donetsk-election/separatist-held-regions-hold-elections-in-eastern-ukraine-idUSKCN1NG045>

<sup>21</sup> Global Security Review, “Analyzing Russian Information Warfare and Influence Operations,” Last modified 8 February 2018. <https://globalsecurityreview.com/cold-war-2-0-russian-information-warfare/>; Forbes, “Chinese Information Warfare: Leveraging the Power of Perception,” Last modified 13 October 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/10/13/chinese-information-warfare-and-sino-american-rivalry/#25016e05703b>

<sup>22</sup> New Zealand Herald, “Revealed: China’s Network of Influence in New Zealand,” Last modified 20 September 2017. [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=3&objectid=11924169](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11924169); Deutsche Welle, “European Politicians Got Millions to Lobby for Pro-Russian Government in Ukraine,” Last modified 24 February 2018. <https://www.dw.com/cda/en/european-politicians-got-millions-to-lobby-for-pro-russian-government-in-ukraine/a-42721849>; Council on Foreign Relations, “Iran Supports Hamas, But Hamas is no Iranian Puppet,” Last modified 7 January 2009. <https://www.cfr.org/interview/iran-supports-hamas-hamas-no-iranian-puppet>

*Economic Tools.* The use of trade or economic power to coerce or intimidate other nations has been used by Russia through its targeted withholding of energy products to gain political leverage over Europe, and by China through its predatory lending practices to Asian neighbours in order to secure infrastructure for naval expansion.<sup>23</sup>

### **Limitations of Liberal Democratic States**

The identification of these tools provides a clear indication of where liberal democracies can and can't go in order to conduct operations within the gray zone. First and foremost, to be effective these activities involve obfuscation. This is difficult to achieve within liberal democracies as they are based on the freedoms of the press and access to information. It would be near impossible for western nations to conduct operations within the GZC and not be discovered, and once discovered, their actions would undermine the very system that western democracies are trying to protect. As Jahara Matissek describes in his article "Shades of Gray Deterrence":

...the international system is entrenched around the centrality of American hegemony as the sole-proprietor on how states should behave. This normative expectation undercuts the United States ability to engage in 'gray zone' activities, as it is much easier for various actors to highlight some United States actions as hypocritical or antithetical to Western values. This systemic shift has implicitly forced the United States to further comply with norms, laws, treaties, and statutes it helped create and institutionalize. It ties the hands of the United States, exposing it to international condemnation whenever it deviates from protocols (e.g., Iraq War, CIA terrorist rendition flights, etc.) that the United States has obliged on the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Daily Mail, "Europe plunged into energy crisis as Russia cuts off gas supply via Ukraine," Last modified 7 January 2009. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1106382/Europe-plunged-energy-crisis-Russia-cuts-gas-supply-Ukraine.html>; The Diplomat, "China's Debtbook Diplomacy: How China is Turning Bad Loans into Strategic Investments," Last modified 30 May 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/chinas-debtbook-diplomacy-how-china-is-turning-bad-loans-into-strategic-investments/>

<sup>24</sup> Jahara Matissek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2017), 8.

Second, once these activities have been brought to light, it is likely the citizens of liberal democratic states would hold their governments to account through their established electoral processes, creating political disruption rather than advantage.

These limitations clarify the area within the gray zone where western liberal democracies can operate: transparently and defensively.

### **Liberal Democratic State Operations in the Gray Zone**

To operate transparently, western nations must reinforce norms through the adherence to the rule of national and international law. To operate defensively, Schaus and his team identify three areas where western governments should be focussing operations in order to counter gray zone threats: countering disinformation; rapid planning and response; and the utilization of a whole of government approach.<sup>25</sup>

*Countering Disinformation.* To counter disinformation, western liberal democracies must leverage all available media to fight the adversary narrative quickly and transparently. According to Matissek, “this translates into the pursuit of shaping overall informational narratives against adversaries by credibly demonstrating facts and disproving adversarial accusations or innuendo.”<sup>26</sup> For example, after the takeover of Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin initially denied the involvement of Russian soldiers, which was vociferously reinforced by state media. However, over time President Putin’s narrative evolved, from hinting at Russian soldiers operating in Ukraine to a declaration “I did not deny anything, Russia was always there.”<sup>27</sup> Although not in control of the free press, western liberal democracies should identify and draw attention to duplicity and apply counter-narratives in opposition to the adversary.

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<sup>25</sup> Schaus et al, “What Works...,” 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Matissek, “Shades of Gray Deterrence,” 20.

<sup>27</sup> Radio Free Europe, “From 'Not Us' To 'Why Hide It?': How Russia Denied Its Crimea Invasion, Then Admitted It,” Last modified 26 February 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/from-not-us-to-why-hide-it-how-russia-denied-its-crimea-invasion-then-admitted-it/29791806.html>

Social media activity has also been used by countries such as Russia to influence the electorate of western nations. Due to the ambiguous nature of cyberspace, these activities have been difficult to prove, and have resulted in late responses after the effect by the adversary has been achieved. In an address to the United States Congress, Former Commander US Special Operations Command Robert Votel indicated “[America needs] to detect previously unseen patterns in complex social media data...and respond to changes in the information environment in real time.”<sup>28</sup> Technology built by private corporations in the global west is being used by China to do exactly what Votel suggests to understand and control public discourse. Ironically, this same technology could be used by western democracies to understand internet and social media traffic in order to predict where and when emerging gray zone threats might surface.<sup>29</sup>

*Rapid Planning and Response.* Schaus et al. argue that current planning by Western nations focuses on responding to the transgression of a red line or the emergence of a regional crisis. However, when adversaries use gray zone tactics that are formulated to stay below these red line triggers, developing a viable response can take considerable time. This delay in response plays into the hands of gray zone actors, allowing them to normalize their newly constructed strategic landscape.<sup>30</sup> For example, Russia’s attempts to influence the US election in 2016 were known to the government for five months before modest measures were approved to punish Russian actors. The delay in action resulted in ambiguity as to the motivations of the US President, the US President Elect, and members of the US Congress, distracting attention from

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<sup>28</sup> Military Times, “America’s silent warriors look to up their game on social media,” Last modified 2 March 2016. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2016/03/02/america-s-silent-warriors-look-to-up-their-game-on-social-media/>

<sup>29</sup> DefenseOne, “Thanks, America! How China’s Newest Software Could Predict, Track, and Crush Dissent,” Last modified 7 March 2016. <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2016/03/thanks-america-china-aims-tech-dissent/126491/>

<sup>30</sup> Schaus et al, “What Works...,” 4.

Russia as a bad actor.<sup>31</sup> Not all countries are choosing a reactive route. Recognizing the need for decisive action in the face of Russia, countries such as Finland and Estonia have developed detailed plans to respond to gray zone threats as quickly as possible.<sup>32</sup> Although not yet developed, the preparatory design of response options to actions within the gray zone has been recommended both by the US Departments of Defense and State to assist in protecting national interests.<sup>33</sup>

*Whole of Government Approach.* As gray zone actors are largely operating outside of the military domain, operations must be coordinated across the whole of government in order to leverage all available instruments of national power to effectively deter or respond. The report written by Michael McCarthy, Mathew Moyer, and Brett Venable for the US War College entitled “Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone” agrees arguing:

...the United States must shift its strategic framework from a predominantly military-centric model to one that comprises a whole-of-government approach. Unlike conventional warfare, the employment of military force alone is not a viable strategy, especially since gray zone conflicts are designed, almost by definition, to circumvent traditional U.S. military power. Thus, the United States must employ all instruments of national power.<sup>34</sup>

A successful example of the whole of government being used to counter gray zone operations was the effective response to Russian attempts at influencing the French presidential election in 2017. The French government’s coordinated use of its Electoral Campaign for the Presidential Election, and its National Cybersecurity Agency provided detailed oversight on

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<sup>31</sup> The Guardian, “New details of Russia election hacking raise questions about Obama's response,” Last modified 23 June 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/23/obama-cia-warning-russia-election-hack-report>

<sup>32</sup> Schaus et al, “What Works...,” 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Nathan Frier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States War College Press, 2016), 78; International Security Advisory Board, *Report on Gray Zone Conflict*, (January 2017), 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Michael McCarthy, Mathew Moyer, and Brett Venable, *Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States War College Press, 2019), 1-2.

those who might influence electoral results. France's Ministry of Foreign affairs proactively messaged the consequences for anyone seeking to affect election outcomes, and the Department of Defence created a robust cyber-warfare command capable of detecting and punishing those who would undermine French interests. Government security organizations identified fake social media accounts, and broad messaging was provided to the public to inform them of the threat. When Russian cyber actors released information they hoped would be damaging to the Macron campaign, the coordinated effort across government resulted in it being largely ineffectual.<sup>35</sup>

Most important in the French case are not just the capabilities themselves, but the ability to coordinate them. As is often the case, the insular silos that exist within government to efficiently address departmental problems do not work well when coordination across departments is required. This lack of interoperability creates seams and gaps that can be exploited by gray zone actors seeking to gain an operational advantage.<sup>36</sup> Recognizing this, the US Department of State's International Security Advisory Board suggested the existing National Security Council was not robust enough to deal with planning and executing responses to gray zone threats, and advised that a civilian institution comparable to a US Combatant Command be established to coordinate whole of government activities.<sup>37</sup>

## **CANADA WITHIN THE GRAY ZONE**

As a western liberal democracy it is not an option for Canada to act offensively within the GZC. Setting aside that it is unlikely to align with Canadian political culture; it is not in the best interest of Canada to undermine national and international laws and norms from which we

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<sup>35</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Successfully Countering Russian Electoral Interference," Last modified 21 June 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference>

<sup>36</sup> Frank Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *Prism*, vol. 7, no. 4, 42.

<sup>37</sup> International Security Advisory Board, *Report on Gray Zone*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2017), 6-7.



benefit as a middle power. Therefore, analyzing the three defensive response options offered by Schaus within a Canadian context, this paper will establish Canada's ability to operate within the GZC.

*Countering Disinformation.* As previously discussed, media, social media, and cyber domains are routinely leveraged by gray zone actors to distract and create discord within the populations of western liberal democracies. In his article, "Countering Russian Disinformation", Timothy McGeehan identifies three areas that countries like Canada could leverage to effectively counter disinformation: warning through the use of artificial intelligence (AI); containment and resilience; and education.<sup>38</sup>

First, McGeehan describes the need to "detect and vector the limited resources available to effectively intercept adversarial information threats."<sup>39</sup> He reasons that in the near future AI could be the deciding factor in responding quickly and decisively to deny exposure of "fake news" to western media. Unfortunately, Canada's foray into AI related research and technology is relatively recent, making it unlikely that Canada would be able to leverage it to defend against adversary disinformation within the near future.<sup>40</sup>

Within the realm of containment and resilience, Canada fairs somewhat better. McGeehan describes the concept of containment as the ability to quickly offer an accurate counter-narrative to prevent the propagation of disinformation by western media. The use of websites, social media accounts, departmental updates, timely corrections, and question and answer sessions all contribute to the containment of adversarial disinformation. Canada has

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy McGeehan, "Countering Russian Disinformation," *Parameters*, vol. 48, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 53-55.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Government of Canada, "Using Artificial Intelligence in government means balancing innovation with the ethical and responsible use of emerging technologies," Last modified 10 October 2018. <https://open.canada.ca/en/blog/using-artificial-intelligence-government-means-balancing-innovation-ethical-and-responsible>

successfully proven it is capable to counter adversary disinformation within the Ukraine and Latvia, countering negative Russian media narratives designed to undermine Canadian Armed Forces activities in both countries.<sup>41</sup>

Resilience is described as building an immunity to disinformation campaigns, inoculating the public through proactive messaging. Knowing that global adversaries have become more involved in attempts to disrupt democratic elections in the United States, France, Australia, and the UK, Canada has been proactively messaging the Canadian public in order for them to be on their guard.<sup>42</sup>

That said, within the realm of educating the Canadian public, there appears to be a long way to go. According to McGeehan,

...prevention campaigns...cannot be effective if the population does not understand them, believe them, or have an awareness of their implications. Education is paramount. It is a national security imperative that Western governments produce citizens capable of critical thought and discerning of the truth.”<sup>43</sup>

However, in its 2018 report “Cyber.assault: It should keep you up at night,” The Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce recognized that Canada needed a national strategy to educate both older and younger Canadians in the use of social media and digital technologies. Specifically, the report recommended “A national cyber literacy program, led by the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, [is needed] to educate consumers and businesses on how to become cyber resilient...at the junior and senior high school levels.”<sup>44</sup> Without a coordinated cyber literacy program Canadians are becoming increasingly susceptible to false information, which

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<sup>41</sup> Global News, “Here’s how the Canadian military is battling fake news in Latvia,” Last modified 10 July 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4322965/canadian-soldiers-fake-news-latvia/>

<sup>42</sup> The Star, “Canadian officials worry that foreign actors are trying to meddle in 2019 election,” Last modified 28 March 2019. <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2019/03/28/canadian-officials-worry-that-foreign-actors-are-trying-to-meddle-in-2019-election.html>

<sup>43</sup> McGeehan, “Countering Russian...” 54.

<sup>44</sup> Doug Black, *Cyber.assault: It should keep you up at night*, (Ottawa, ON, 2018), 17.

works in the favour of gray zone adversaries who are leveraging disinformation for their national gain.

*Rapid Planning and Response.* With the abolishment of the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management (CCEM) in 2018 Canada no longer has an organization capable of coordinating security related planning across the departments of finance, foreign affairs, public safety and defence. Duties relating to policy of the CCEM were transferred to the Cabinet Committee on Canada in the World and Public Security, and the newly created Incident Response Group was given the responsibility of coordinating government effort in a crisis. The responsibility for contingency planning has been relegated to Public Safety Canada (PSC), which is problematic as it does not have the mandate or expertise to plan diplomatic, military, or economic responses to gray zone crisis. Further, it is highly likely that any planning completed by PSC would be a secondary task for an internal team that would be unable to harvest the experience or knowledge of Global Affairs Canada, Department of National Defence, and the Ministry of Finance.

The need for a dedicated organization to plan gray zone responses was specifically identified by the United States Department of State, who recommended “the United States should establish, with cross-government participation and National Security Council oversight, an “on-the-shelf” structure for detailed planning and conducting rapid – and enduring and coordinated – counter gray zone operations.”<sup>45</sup> With the dissolution of the Cabinet Committee on Emergency Management, Canada no longer has a cross-government entity responsible for planning for gray zone responses in advance.

Instead, Canada has chosen to utilize the Incident Response Group, a similar organization to the United Kingdom (UK) Government’s Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA), an ad-

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<sup>45</sup> International Security Advisory Board, *Report...* 16.

hoc group created in the face of a crisis and chaired by the Prime Minister.<sup>46</sup> The advantage of the COBRA is that it can be custom built for an incident, calling on individuals from across government to provide advice to decision makers and coordinate actions from across multiple departments. The UK has been using the COBRA concept since 1972, and has successfully used it to coordinate response to the terrorist event at the Iranian Embassy in 1980 and mass flooding in 2000.<sup>47</sup> That said, its use has not been without controversy.

The use of the COBRA in response to the London bombings in 2005 was described by The Head of the Metropolitan Police Special Operations Section, Andy Hayman, as politically focussed and slow to respond.<sup>48</sup> After the resulting investigation, the Home Affairs Committee recognized that there was some confusion in the timing and execution of COBRA meetings to develop options for government, and that this could contribute to hindering operational response.<sup>49</sup> Further, the report recognized the importance for ministers and senior government officials that might be involved in COBRA meetings to participate in simulation exercises to “[refine] contingency plans and [allow] key actors [the] experience of coordinating a government response...” and that they are “an extremely valuable tool in focusing minds.”<sup>50</sup> According to the committee, despite this process existing for over 46 years there was still room to improve.

With the adoption of the COBRA concept less than a year ago, it is unlikely that it will be in a mature enough state to meet the demands required to counter gray zone actors with the speed and detail required. Further, if an established process within the UK suffered issues related to

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<sup>46</sup> Adam Chapnick, conversation with author, 24 April 2019.

<sup>47</sup> United Kingdom Defence Journal, “The Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) – A Short Introduction,” Last modified 18 October 2018. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/the-cabinet-office-briefing-rooms-cobr-a-short-introduction/>

<sup>48</sup> The Times, “COBRA Emergency Meeting Slows Everything Down,” last modified 22 June 2009. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article6552590.ece?print=yes&randnum=1151003209000>

<sup>49</sup> www.parliament.uk, “The Home Office's Response to Terrorist Attacks - Home Affairs Committee,” last modified 2 February 2010. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmhaff/117/11705.htm#note11>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

political rather than operation focus and poor attendance by senior leaders during simulation exercises, how can Canada hope to respond differently? Considerable effort will be required by the Canadian government to execute a successful response to gray zone actors.

Finally, during its investigation the Home Affairs Committee identified a key limitation of the COBRA: “While we are convinced that it performs its function well, we are also of the belief that there is a danger of overstating the importance of COBRA which...does nothing to prevent an attack occurring...”<sup>51</sup> The committee identified the need for a planning organization to arm the COBRA with the information, policy, and options to be leveraged when a crisis occurs. As Canada no longer has a dedicated organization that could be successfully leveraged to plan for gray zone operations across governmental departments it is unlikely that detailed analysis encompassing all instruments of national power has been completed, or plans developed.

*Whole of Government Approach.* Finally, for Canada to effectively counter gray zone threats it must be able to coordinate all instruments of national power, necessitating a WoG approach. Unfortunately, Canada has repeatedly struggled to implement and execute operations across multiple government departments.

The formal adoption of the WoG approach occurred in response to Canada’s attempts to provide security and development assistance in Afghanistan. In their book “Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts? Assessing the Whole of Government Approach to Fragile States,” Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown stated “Canada continues to struggle in achieving cross-departmental agreement on objectives and motivations for its interventions, as well as in designing and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

implementing country strategies.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this shortcoming being identified in the Manley Report, this lack of cooperation continued for over two years, resulting in government departments working according to their own priorities instead of a common national goal.<sup>53</sup>

WoG was also utilized by the Canadian government to establish security for the 2010 Winter Olympics, aligning the Department of National Defence in support of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, under the purview of the Public Safety Canada (PSC). Despite these organizations all being security focussed, it was discovered that PSC was incapable of coordinating between government departments, resulting in over-all authority being temporarily placed in the hands of the Privy Council Office. The result was an ad-hoc organization where “it was sometimes difficult to determine who was in charge as no agency was apparently willing to cede authority on any issue of substantive importance.”<sup>54</sup> Although relationships were developed throughout the conduct of the games to increase inter-departmental cooperation, it would appear these relationships were short lived. On completion of the games, it was recognized that the temporary nature of interdepartmental relationships would likely stand in the way of establishing lessons learned into more formal processes; that “the operational effectiveness...is therefore limited by issues of hubris and tribalism resulting in a concern over the dissipation of power that could result from structural changes...”<sup>55</sup>

Sadly, although experiences in Afghanistan and the Vancouver Olympics indicate a recognized need for more formalized relationships to coordinate efforts across multiple departments, Canada has proven itself incapable to do so. This lack of coordination will stand in

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<sup>52</sup> Stewart Patrick, and Kaysie Brown, *Greater than the Sum of Its Parts? Assessing “Whole of Government” Approaches to Fragile States*, (New York, NY: International Peace Academy, 2007), 57.

<sup>53</sup> Caroline Leprince, “The Canadian-Led Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team: A Success Story?,” *International Journal*, vol. 68, no. 2, 367-368.

<sup>54</sup> Bernard Brister, “Family Relations: A Preliminary Analysis of the Use of the Comprehensive Approach at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics,” in *Security Operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Canadian Perspectives on the Comprehensive Approach* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 167.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

the way of efforts to coordinate operations across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains in response to gray zone adversaries in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The GZC has been recognized by global adversaries as the way forward in order to bring about change to the current world order. With Russia and China actively utilizing their strength as totalitarian states to exploit the weaknesses of liberal democracies, western nations are being forced to re-evaluate their approaches in order to effectively respond. It would seem that although General Rouleau contends that the CAF is operating within the gray zone, it is not up to the CAF to address it alone. Using the previously included analysis of Canada's shortcomings this paper offers three suggestions to improve its response to gray zone activities.

First, Canada must improve its ability to leverage technology in order to anticipate threats within the information realm. This technology should be able to analyze media and social media for trends indicating adversary gray zone activity, and should be monitored by a civilian agency reporting to the communications department within the Privy Council Office. National education standards should be established through partnership with the provinces and territories in order to develop the skills necessary to critically analyze the media they are exposed to on a daily basis.

Second, Canada must develop its ability to plan and execute gray zone operations across multiple government departments. Reinstating the CCEM and staffing it with ministers from Global Affairs, Public Safety, National Defence, and Finance would be an excellent start to develop cross-collaborative planning for responses to gray zone threats. Further, lessons learned from the UK's COBRA should be integrated into Canada's new Incident Response Group in order to develop robust standard operating procedures which are validated by simulation exercises attended by leaders up to and including ministerial level.

Third, Canada must address its inability to execute operations within a WoG approach. The suggestions mentioned previously would contribute to this, but any attempted remedy must be deliberate and enduring. As was proven by WoG approaches in Afghanistan and the Vancouver Olympics, ad-hoc organizations do little to create the synchronization necessary to maximize effects across multiple government departments. The Privy Council Office (PCO) was successfully utilized in both cases to provide unifying direction when departments were unable to successfully cooperate, but a cabinet committee similar to the CCEM enabled by the PCO may be a better organization to develop and execute unified operations in the gray zone.

Regardless of how it chooses to proceed, Canada will be challenged by gray zone actors seeking to manipulate the global order in their favour. Russia and China are operating with increasing frequency in close proximity to Canada's North, and both are increasingly invested in Eastern Europe. Canada's national interests and its NORAD and NATO commitments will result in a collision course with one or both of these actors within the GZC, and Canada's current posture leaves it at a terrible disadvantage. Neither its proximity to the United States, nor the physical barriers provided by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans will provide the protection Canada needs to maintain its place within the global order. Canada must change its approach in order to effectively counter future threats within the gray zone, or prepare to be the victim of global adversaries moving forward into the future.



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